

THE MONTESSORI METHOD.

(Paper read at the Ambleside Conference.)

It is prophesied by some that the remarkable advance made by Dr. Maria Montessori in the theory and practice of the home and school education of children up to 7 years of age will ultimately place her name with those of Pestalozzi and Froebel as one of the greatest in the history of educational progress. This prophecy is based upon two grounds: First, she has devised a method in closer accord with the biological principles of child development than any previously known. In the second place, her method, being founded on Liberty, proceeds along the lines which the political development of society inevitably dictates. But liberty may degenerate into licence on the one hand and tyranny on the other. In Dr. Montessori's pupils freedom soon ceases to be licence and become self-control; discipline and steady application being obtained without the spur of rewards or punishments. Though her method is based on knowledge rather than on intuition, Dr. Montessori appreciates fully the uselessness of knowledge without sympathy. No one has such need to base all his teaching on love, as he who aspires to the teaching of the mentally deficient. This truth was preached and practised by Séguin and Itard, whose disciple he was. It was by the inspiration and guidance of these two noble men that Dr. Montessori devised a method of teaching reading and writing to deficient children, which resulted in their passing the public examination held for normal children. After a time, she gave up active work amongst abnormal children that she might give herself entirely to the study of Itard and Séguin. She even translated their works into Italian for her own benefit, in order that she might lose nothing of the *spirit* of the author. "The voice of Séguin," she writes, "seemed

to be like the voice of the forerunner crying in the wilderness, and my thoughts were filled with the immensity and the importance of a work which should be able to reform the school education." In 1906 Dr. Montessori was invited to organize the infant schools of some model tenements in Rome. Here was the opportunity for which she longed. She gathered together in each school about fifty to sixty babes of from 2½ to 6 years, and gave them full liberty of individual action. This brings us to Dr. Montessori's fundamental principle of liberty. A true disciple of Séguin, she shares his view of liberty. "The child," says Dr. Montessori, "like every strong creature fighting for the right to live, rebels against whatever offends that occult impulse within him which is the voice of Nature, and which he ought to obey; and he shows by violent actions, by screaming and weeping, that he has been overborne and forced away from his mission in life (to develop himself through his own action)." This accords with the modern view that so-called "naughtiness" in little children is, as often as not, a safety valve for the escape of nervous energy. Such "naughtiness" can soon be banished by a change of thought in congenial occupation. Dr. Montessori quite realizes that this principle of freedom can be too loosely interpreted by teachers; she speaks of schools where such was the case—children with their feet on tables, etc., and no intervention made to correct them. "I saw others," she says, "push their companions, and I saw dawn in the faces of these, an expression of violence; and not the slightest attention on the part of the teacher. Then I had to intervene to show with what rigour it is necessary to hinder, and little by little to suppress, all those things which we must not do; so that the child may come to discern between good and evil." It would appear from these words that Dr. Montessori does not share our belief that "the child is born

a law-abiding being, with a sense of 'may' and 'must not,' of right and wrong." At the same time, she holds that obedience is a deep-rooted instinct in human nature, and that the child prefers orderly and disciplined behaviour to the unregulated disobedience which some attribute to the "natural child." Apparently it is in the question of repression that the inexperienced Montessori teacher finds her greatest difficulty. But it is clear that while leaving the pupil absolute freedom in choice of occupation, she must have no hesitation in checking bad conduct. If reproof or punishment be necessary, it should be immediate and, if possible, be such as will be perceived by the child as fitting the offence. Here, at least, Dr. Montessori is with us in the belief that all punishment "should be the natural or, at any rate, the relative consequences of conduct."

Dr. Montessori quotes an interesting observation by a teacher (one of her own pupils) as to the different stages of learning how to do a thing. First, there are the unsuccessful attempts when the child fails or only imperfectly succeeds. Then comes the time when, without quite knowing how it happens, he chances to succeed. At once delighted and surprised, he tries it again, but fails. After more practice comes the next stage, when he can nearly always do it if he wants to, but makes mistakes if someone else asks him to do it. We have all experienced this in dealing with children, and it is well to bear in mind these stages of progress. How often we are tempted to say, "You are not trying, Tommy," whereas it is often Tommy's very eagerness to succeed, which interferes with the accomplishment of the act. As Dr. Montessori always insists: "He must be given time." Dr. Montessori lays great stress on the tendency of the little child to *repetition*—its significance in education. In this connection she considers it most important that the child should be allowed to "exhaust his im-

pulse." She would have us realize that as the brain is organized by the discharge of nervous energy, the healthy, spontaneous actions of young children cannot be interfered with without danger of preventing this discharge along a normal path. Thus to expect a little child to "keep still" for any definite period is on a par with telling an adult not to think. Though, of course, quite tiny children may often remain still for a considerable time if absorbed in some occupation, the nervous energy being all directed to the solution of the problem engaging them. Children find it easy to imitate calmness and repose (and may even do so unconsciously), so that a skilful teacher may direct the nervous discharges from the motor channels at her will. Here is a description of the game of silence at a Montessori school. "The teacher begins by offering herself as an example of perfect silence. Sitting in her chair (as the children are themselves sitting, she should sit), she calls attention to the different parts of her body, to show how still they are. 'See my feet; can you keep yours quite, quite still? Do you hear my breath?' and so on. Then she may rise from her chair and ask them to watch how silently she does it. She walks on tiptoe with scarcely a sound. She may ask them if they can be as quiet as a little mouse? or in winter, 'Who can be as silent as a snowflake?' Then she calls a child to her and, while the class watches, she asks him to be as silent as she is and to listen for the little noises he makes even when he thinks he is quite still. Thus they learn there are degrees of silence, and as the whole class tries to imitate her, she calls attention to this or that movement by which the silence is broken. In that way 'the attention of the child is called to every part of his body in an anxious effort to attain to immobility.'" To heighten the effect, Dr. Montessori has the room darkened; then telling the children to close their eyes, she goes into a room behind them.

“ ‘Now listen,’ she says, ‘a soft voice is going to call your name.’ So each child waits in silent expectation for the voice which shall call him, and then with joy and opened eyes, but still with the utmost quietness, tiptoes across the room to the calling voice. Even children of three years have remained immovable in the silence during the long period required for calling forty children out of the room. Later, this ‘making of silence’ is a prelude for many games, and it forms fitting preparation to lessons in musical sounds.”

However much we may disagree with the Montessori method, there is one lesson all teachers may learn from it: that reverent and devoted love for the child which is the most important of all qualities in those who would teach very young children. In this paper I have confined myself to the principles of the method for two reasons: First, time is very limited; second, my object has been, as far as possible, to find “what helpful points may be gleaned from it,” and I feel that these do not lie in the practice of the Montessori method or in the “apparatus” of which one hears so much. Anyone wishing to know more of the latter will do well to study Mr. Culverwell’s delightfully unprejudiced book on the *Montessori Method*, from which I have taken my information for this paper. In this book the practice and apparatus are fully described with illustrations, as also in *A Montessori Mother*, by Mrs. Fisher.

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